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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 002004

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MESIC IN BELGRADE: HISTORIC VISIT?

REF: BELGRADE 2179

CLASSIFIED BY: NICHOLAS HILL, POLECON COUNSELOR, REASONS: 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: CROATIAN AUTHORITIES ARE GENERALLY SATISFIED WITH PRESIDENT MESIC'S SEPTEMBER 10 TRIP TO BELGRADE. THE PRESIDENT'S FOREIGN POLICY ADVISOR, ANOTHER MESIC STAFFER, AND THE HEAD OF THE MFA'S EASTERN BALKANS OFFICE TOLD US THE TRIP WENT BETTER THAN EXPECTED, WITH THE TWO PRESIDENTS MAKING FROM-THE-HEART STATEMENTS OF REGRET FOR THEIR RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES' WAR-TIME LEGACIES. THE SAM AMBASSADOR TO CROATIA, ON HAND IN BELGRADE FOR THE VISIT, SAID THE SAME THING TO US ON RETURNING. THE CROATIAN PRESS REPORTED SOME GRUMBLING, BUT FOR THE MOST PART THIS CAME FROM THE USUAL SUSPECTS IN THE OPPOSITION TRYING TO SCORE POINTS BEFORE ELECTIONS, EXPECTED IN NOVEMBER. END SUMMARY

HISTORIC VISIT?

2. (SBU) PRESIDENT MESIC'S TRIP TO BELGRADE WENT MUCH BETTER THAN EXPECTED. THIS WAS HOW DAVOR VIDIS, HEAD OF THE MFA'S EASTERN BALKANS OFFICE, SUMMED IT UP DURING A MEETING SEPTEMBER 12. HE TOLD US THAT THE PRESIDENT TOOK ALONG SEVERAL KEY PEOPLE -- INCLUDING FINANCE MINISTER CRKVENAC AND DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER SIMONOVIC -- AND A LIST OF ISSUES TO TACKLE. BUT TIME WAS SHORT, AND WHEN THE TWO PRESIDENTS EXCHANGED APOLOGIES MID-WAY DURING THE VISIT, ALL THE OTHER ISSUES MELTED INTO INSIGNIFICANCE. VIDIS TERMED THE EXCHANGE OF APOLOGIES AN "HISTORIC" MOMENT IN THE RELATIONSHIP.

3. (C) MESIC'S SENIOR FOREIGN POLICY ADVISOR, IVICA MASTRUKO, TOLD US SEPTEMBER 12 THAT, DESPITE THE BREVITY OF THE VISIT, THE PRESIDENT COVERED MUCH GROUND. THE TWO DELEGATIONS DISCUSSED THE DANUBE BORDER DISPUTE. MESIC MET WITH A GROUP OF SERBIAN REFUGEES, AND LATER WITH A GROUP OF ETHNIC CROAT LEADERS FROM SERBIA'S NORTHERN PROVINCE OF VOJVODINA. MASTRUKO SAID THAT MESIC INVITED SAM PRESIDENT MAROVIC TO CROATIA FOR A VISIT, PREFERABLY BEFORE THE END THE YEAR. THE CHEMISTRY BETWEEN MESIC AND MAROVIC -- BOTH FORMER COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBERS IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA -- IS MUCH BETTER THAN THAT BETWEEN MESIC AND FORMER FRY PRESIDENT KOSTUNICA.

4. (C) SEPARATELY, KATARINA TRSNJAK, AN MFA OFFICIAL SECONDED TO MESIC'S OFFICE, TOLD US THAT MESIC WAS SURPRISED BY SAM PRESIDENT MAROVIC'S STATEMENT OF REGRET. MAROVIC USED VERY STRAIGHT-FORWARD LANGUAGE, WITHOUT ANY HESITATION. THE CROATIANS ON THE DELEGATION, SHE SAID, EXPECTED LANGUAGE MUCH LESS FORTHCOMING. AT THE SAME TIME, MESIC'S COMMENTS WERE MORE "LEGALLY GROUNDED," AS SHE PUT IT, ALTHOUGH ALSO VERY SINCERE. ECHOING VIDIS, TRSNJAK SAID THAT AFTER THE EXCHANGE OF APOLOGIES IT BECAME VERY DIFFICULT TO CONDUCT OTHER BUSINESS. "IT WAS NEITHER THE PLACE NOR THE TIME."

OTHER REACTION

5. (SBU) MEANWHILE, PUBLIC REACTIONS TO THE VISIT WERE GENERALLY POSITIVE. PM RACAN SAID HE "WELCOMED" MAROVIC'S STATEMENT, WHICH HE CHARACTERIZED AS AN IMPORTANT SYMBOLIC GESTURE IN THE STATES' BILATERAL RELATIONS. DEFENSE MINISTER ANTUNOVIC SAID THE TWO PRESIDENTS' REMARKS AUGURED WELL FOR EVEN BETTER RELATIONS IN THE FUTURE. CRITICS INCLUDED HARD-LINE NATIONALIST IVIC PASALIC, PRESIDENT OF THE CROATIAN BLOCK, WHO TERMED MESIC'S STATEMENT OF CONTRITION "DISGRACEFUL," AND MAROVIC'S "INADEQUATE." HDZ VICE PRESIDENT JADRANKA KOSAR AND CROATIAN PARTY OF RIGHTS PRESIDENT ANTE DJAPIC SAID THEY OBJECTED TO WHAT SEEMED LIKE AN EQUALIZATION OF GUILT.

COMMENT

6. (SBU) ANY MESIC TRIP, OWING TO THE PRESIDENT'S LIMITED CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS, IS GOING TO BE SHORT ON SUBSTANCE -- AND THIS ONE WAS NO EXCEPTION. MESIC AND MAROVIC SHOWED SOME DEGREE OF POLITICAL COURAGE IN EXCHANGING APOLOGIES, AND THIS VISIT WILL DO MUCH TO PUSH BILATERAL RELATIONS EVEN FURTHER IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. VIDIS WAS MORE CONFIDENT THAN HE HAS BEEN IN SOME WHILE ABOUT THE PROSPECTS FOR PROGRESS ON A NUMBER OF OUTSTANDING ISSUES, INCLUDING BORDERS. AND THE BEST THING ABOUT THIS VISIT, HE QUIPPED, WAS THAT IT PUSHED ZAGREB'S PROBLEMS WITH SLOVENIA OFF THE FRONT PAGES.

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